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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: GORANI EDUCATION DISAGREEMENT ILLUSTRATES
COMMUNITY'S PRECARIOUS POSITION

REF: PRISTINA 290

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

Summary

1. (SBU) A long-simmering disagreement between Gorani leaders, Kosovar education officials, and Belgrade's Coordination Center for Kosovo and Metohija (CCK) highlights the complex situation of the Gorani, a Muslim minority who live in the southern part of Dragas municipality and speak a dialect of Serbian. At issue is who will pay Gorani teachers and which curriculum their children will use. Most teachers who refused to sign contracts with the Provisional Institutions of Self Government (PISG) have been replaced, but the fight over education has added to the sense of grievance of the Gorani, who see themselves as having been alternately ignored and exploited both by Belgrade and Pristina. END SUMMARY.

Who are the Gorani?

2. (SBU) The Gorani are a group of Slavic-speaking Muslims who have resided for centuries in Gora, the southern, mountainous part of Dragas municipality which was a separate municipality until 1999. About 8,000 of a prewar Gorani population of around 18,000 remain in the area; much of the outmigration occurred immediately after the war but the economically deprived area had seen a net outflow to other parts of then-Yugoslavia and Western Europe for decades before. The Gorani dialect is most closely related to Serbian/Bosnian, but includes strong Macedonian influences and some unique vocabulary. Some Gorani see themselves as a distinct ethnic group, while others insist that "Gorani" is merely a term for the subset of the wider Bosniak community who live in the Gora region. Those who claim a Bosniak identity do so, in part, to ease cooperation with the neighboring ethnic Albanian majority, since the Gorani's traditional sympathy with Serbian policy on subjects including school curricula has prompted many Albanians to

view them with suspicion as a potential "fifth column" for Belgrade. According to PM Ceku's political advisor Arben Qirezi, Macedonia and Bulgaria are now claiming the Gorani as their own.

13. (SBU) The issue of Gorani ethnic identity has become caught up in Kosovo's dysfunctional intra-Bosniak politics, as two rival parties vie for the votes of Gora's citizens. The Citizens' Initiative of Gora (GIG), some of whose leaders are more sympathetic to Serbian positions, has close ties to Serbia's CCK, while Vatan, a Bosniak party that belongs to the "Six Plus" minority bloc in Kosovo's governing coalition, received the largest share of non-Albanian votes in the area and governs Dragas in coalition with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). Vatan leaders and their Six Plus colleagues stress their community's interest in fostering good relations with their Albanian neighbors and insist that GIG's coziness with Belgrade and strident complaints damage their community's prospects for a future in post-status Kosovo, while Gorani leaders insist that the Gorani who posit a Bosniak identity are denying the community's heritage and failing to address its concerns.

The Education Issue Heats Up

14. (SBU) The issue of whether Gorani schools should use the Serbian or Kosovar curriculum has festered since at least 2003, with a series of patched-together agreements allowing for Gorani students to continue in school after various boycotts. Two things shifted the disagreement into high gear earlier this year, however: the CCK's insistence in April 2006 that Gorani teachers stop taking salaries from the Provisional Institutions of Self Government (PISG), and the

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Kosovar education restructuring that made high school last three years (grades 9-12) instead of the four years (grades 8-12) in the Serbian system. Until that time, Gorani teachers -- alone among non-Serb minorities -- had received salaries from both the CCK and the PISG. When forced to choose (reftel), most opted for the 500-600 euro monthly CCK salary over the much smaller (approximately 150 euro per month) PISG salary. The municipal government and Kosovar Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST), however, insisted before the start of the 2006-07 school year that all teachers would be required to sign PISG work contracts and to teach according to the Kosovar curriculum, or they would be replaced by teachers who were willing to sign contracts and accept PISG salaries.

15. (SBU) The recent restructuring of Kosovar education also made the Gorani dilemma more acute, since Serbian universities (including the Serbian-influenced university in northern Mitrovica) refuse to admit graduates of high schools using the MEST curriculum. This refusal to recognize PISG-system high school diplomas limits Gorani high school graduates to studying at one of the two Bosnian-language university programs in Kosovo (the teaching faculty in Prizren or the business faculty in Peja/Pec); attending Pristina University, where they can take exams in Serbian/Bosnian but must be able to understand lectures in Albanian; or studying in Bosnia, where their diplomas are accepted but they are required to pay out-of-country tuition rates. This lack of access to higher education in Serbia, where Gorani high school graduates have traditionally studied, has fueled many parents' concerns with the changeover to the new system.

16. (SBU) A series of confrontations and partial compromises over the course of the past three months has left Dragas with an odd patchwork of teachers and curricula. Teachers in a few villages agreed to sign PISG contracts, while most refused. The local authorities barred teachers who had not signed PISG contracts from teaching in most areas, and replaced many of those who refused with newly-hired teachers,

though teachers in Krusevo village set up a parallel school run according to the Serbian curriculum. Calls by CCK-paid teachers to boycott classes taught under the new curriculum were heeded by parents and students in some areas but not others. As of early December, all elementary school students were back in school, as were all high school students except those in the multiethnic high school in Dragas town, where the CCK-paid teachers' boycott received stronger support due to the dependence of most parents on salaries or stipends from Belgrade. Most students (about 1100 of 1768) are now being taught according to the Kosovo curriculum, though an agreement reached with the support of the MEST allowed some schools to postpone the implementation of the new curriculum until the 2007-08 school year.

Intracommunity Divisions Complicate Issue

17. (SBU) Differences in views of the education issue among local community members were conspicuous during poloffs' December 7 meetings with Gorani and Bosniak leaders. Vatan member and Dragas deputy mayor Sabidin Cufta and Prizren deputy mayor Cemajlj Kurtisi, a member of the Democratic Party of Bosniaks, a partner in the Six Plus coalition in the Kosovo government, told poloffs that their strategy of cooperation with ethnic Albanians had yielded benefits for their community, including an equitable division of municipal positions. They stressed that integration into the Kosovar school system was in their children's best interest, since "we see where final status is going" and such integration would better equip them for a future in Kosovo after final status is decided. Both insisted that the CCK was interested only in manipulating the Gorani by compelling loyalty through unrealistically high teacher salaries. They alleged that the CCK-paid teachers, rather than parents or students, had been

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the moving force behind opposition to the new curriculum and contracts, and that they had offered numerous compromises to the parents of the few high school students still out of school, but that the parents -- probably under pressure -- had refused to send their children to the multiethnic school where other classes were taught under the new curriculum. Bosniak journalist Mustafa Balje, who comes from Gora and has followed the issue closely, took a similar view, charging that the issue was created by the CCK's manipulation of teachers through salaries, that many parents wanted their children educated under the Kosovar system, and that the newly-hired teachers were in many cases better qualified than their predecessors.

18. (SBU) GIG vice president and Dragas CCK representative Abdi Alija, by contrast, insisted that the PISG's insistence on imposing the new curriculum on Gorani schools had caused the problem. He acknowledged that the CCK's insistence that any teacher who cooperated with the MEST would lose his or her larger CCK salary had contributed to the current situation, but insisted that most parents strongly preferred the Serbian curriculum and its teachers because the teachers were better qualified and the curriculum allows access to the Serbian university system. He said the CCK has tried hard to help the Gorani, but that the municipal government blocks any attempt by Serbian authorities to implement projects, such as road improvements.

"Our Voice Is Barely Heard"

19. (SBU) Both sides agree, however, that the Gorani community's isolation and poverty, and the relative lack of engagement with the Gorani by either Pristina or Belgrade, leaves them worried about the future and vulnerable to manipulation. The region suffers even more unemployment than many areas of Kosovo, and the treacherous roads among its mountain villages have the dubious distinction of being among Kosovo's worst. Conversations about education with community

representatives on any side of the issue quickly turn to other issues that make the Gorani feel neglected or aggrieved, such as the fact that they are charged 3.5 euros a month for RTK television service when they do not receive a television signal, and are placed in the lowest category of electricity distribution (category C) because they withhold the 3.5 euro television charge from their electric bill payments. Balje noted that many Gorani are worried about the future because "our voice is barely heard" by PISG institutions. The Gorani have no great confidence in Belgrade -- Cufta noted that, aside from salaries, the only CCK aid the community had received was a few food deliveries that annoyed Muslim Gorani by including pork -- but the lack of responsiveness of Pristina to their concerns has left them vulnerable to salary pressure from Serbia. Balje noted that more thorough and proactive PISG explanations of the new education system, or action on other Gorani concerns such as roads or electricity, would go a long way to show the Gorani that they have a future in Kosovo.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The Gorani will likely have little choice but to adapt to the Kosovo education system -- as the Bosniak community has done -- since the party that won the majority of Bosniak/Gorani votes in Dragas firmly supports the MEST's position of including them in that system. That the issue became so difficult in the first place, however, illustrates the sad combination of marginalization by Pristina and pressure from the CCK to follow its policies. More effective outreach by Kosovar authorities, and more active and effective engagement in the Kosovo political process by the Gorani, will be necessary to improve their situation in the longer term.

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¶11. (U) Post clears this message in its entirety for release to Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.
KAIDANOW